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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a program intended to increase student attendance in a Savannah, Georgia, inner city high school. The author maintains that shifting the accountability for attendance to the students through peer pressure was perhaps the most significant reason for gains in attendance. He believes that a successful attendance increase program depends on developing positive student self-concepts and encouraging cooperation among faculty, staff, and student body. (Author/DS)

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THE ATTENDANCE NIGHTMARE

by John A. Phillips, Jr.

INTRODUCTION

In the light of declining test scores and the demonstrated lack of communication and computational skills of many of today's high school students, it is of the utmost importance for students to establish regular attendance patterns.

As a principal of a high school in Savannah, Georgia, the following remarks will be delivered from the practitioner's perspective rather than from a philosophical approach.

I would like to pre-empt my discussion with a brief overview of the historical implications and basic characteristics of the city of Savannah, Georgia, the Savannah-Chatham County Public School System, and Savannah High School.

BACKGROUND

The population of Savannah, Georgia, is approximately 200,000 of which 34,000 students attend public schools housing grades K-12. The racial composition of the public school system is approximately 42% non-white and 58% white. Many ethnic groups such as Italians, Jew, Greeks, and Catholics reside in Savannah and are influential components of the political power structure.

It would appear that Savannah, like many other cities, has been sprouting suburbs mainly for whites of upper and middle incomes while neglecting the original core of the city. Particularly during the

60's, the core was left for low income persons predominately black. Ancillary to the white flight from the inner city and as desegregation was affirmed, a corresponding loss of white students took place as private schools emerged.

Savannah High School is one of the oldest secondary schools in the state of Georgia and has a long and prestigious tradition. The role of the school has changed from a traditional college-preparatory school for upper and middle income families to an inner city comprehensive high school. The total school population is 2200 with grades 9-12. The racial composition is approximately 37% white and 63% minority with 60% of the students being bused. Savannah High School is classified as a Title I school with a high concentration of economically and educationally deprived families with 60% of the student body receiving lunch assistance. The school is staffed by 167 people of whom 120 are professionals.

During the 1974-75 and 1975-76 school years, a steady decline in attendance was evident. The average daily attendance for the 1975-76 school year was 82% and dropped to an all-time low of 79% during one attendance period.

ASSUMPTIONS

As a veteran of ten years in the public schools, I have made the following observations concerning attendance.

1. I have found a strong correlation between the attendance rate and the population density - urban areas generally have poorer attendance

patterns than suburban or rural areas.

2. The school size has a direct relationship to attendance with the larger schools generally manifesting the poorer attendance rate.

3. Generally, the ninth and tenth grade students in senior highs are identified as the target groups with the poorest attendance, especially in minority males.

4. A faculty and staff who believe urban students are capable of learning, who are willing to develop high expectations, and who accept the challenge of various ways to motivate and teach, influence good attendance.

5. School curriculum and school and staff organization directly affect attendance.

PROCEDURES AND/OR ACTIVITIES IMPLEMENTED TO INCREASE AVERAGE DAILY ATTENDANCE

In the 1976-77 school year, I was appointed principal of Savannah High School. It was quite evident that the school was riddled with severe problems of discipline and absenteeism which accounted for low faculty and staff morale.

The following procedures and activities, not listed in priority order, were implemented:

1. A policy was developed to deter students from being tardy to school:

> Following a ten minute grace period during homeroom, students are not permitted to enter school without parental accompaniment.

2. A more rigid school attendance policy was developed to earn academic credit. Students who accumulate more than ten unexcused

absences in any given quarter received no academic credit. Make-up work was given only for certified absences.

3. A reward system for the homeroom with the highest average daily attendance during each attendance period was established. The homeroom with the highest ADA received a special field trip.

4. Special activities were planned on Mondays and Fridays since these days were identified as those incurring a high rate of absence.

* 5. The quarter system, which provides easy entrance and exit three times during the year, was developed. Non-restricted electives were opened to enrollment from all grades. Twelve-week courses replaced year-long courses.

* 6. Certificates of recognition were presented by the local Board of Education to the high school, middle school, and elementary school with the highest attendance, and most improved during each attendance period.

7. All truancy cases were referred to visiting teachers for court action where necessary.

8. Students 16 years of age who were consistently absent were notified by registered mail that they would be withdrawn after five (5) calendar days if regular attendance was not established.

* 9. Alternative programs were offered to students with low self-concepts and attendance problems, for example, coordinated vocational and academic educational programs. Opportunities were provided for students to enroll in vocational and technical programs with credit.

10. Homeroom teachers were continually requested to encourage student attendance.

11. Motivational posters, a graph of attendance and Certificates of Recognition for Attendance were displayed throughout the school.

12. Periodically, motivational announcements were made on the intercom during homeroom and in student publications.

13. Homeroom teachers were requested to telephone the parents of daily absentees and record the stated reasons for absences on attendance cards which were reviewed by assistant principals.

14. The pupil/teacher ratio was reduced.

15. Teacher advisory groups were formed to establish better communication between administrators, teachers, and students as to the enunciated expectations and concerns.

16. An administrative organization which embraced the "school within a school concept" was developed.

PRESENT SUCCESS

The procedures and activities previously defined proved successful at Savannah High School. During the 1976-77 school year, the average daily attendance increased to 86% for the year, a 4% increase over the preceding year. There were increases of as much as 7% during individual attendance periods. Currently, the average daily attendance is 89-90% and has gone as high as 92%.

SUMMARY

In summary, I believe that shifting the accountability for attendance to the students' shoulders through peer pressure is perhaps the most

significant reason for gains in student attendance. Success of the plan depends upon developing positive student self-concepts and encouraging cooperation among faculty, staff and student body.

*Initiated by Dr. D. J. Harrison, Superintendent of Schools, and approved by the Savannah-Chatham County Board of Public Education.